

Los Angeles County Commission for Women

PRESIDENT'S REPORT for NOVEMBER 18, 2013

For the last month my primary activities have been reviewing emails and communications from other women's organizations, and working with staff to build agendas and provide facilitation for meetings. Increased involvement with upcoming statewide policy summit and conference of combined commissions to be held in southern California are essential foci for the future. As with all such undertakings, there are numerous communications among participants and organizers that must be addressed 'behind the scene'. In addition, several areas for advocacy on women's issues have been shared with Commissioners for personal consideration or action.

My most recent adventure found me traveling as part of an *educational mission* to Cuba with the seaside Institute delegation comprised of urban planners, architects, artists and one (me) representative from urban tourism/hospitality. Health and food -sourcing are primary concerns for the residents of Havana, and the overall well-being of women and children is underscored by rationing of food and other household products such as meat, soap, toilet tissue, and basic hygiene products. Dietary staples include rice and beans and the country is introducing the production and consumption of green vegetables with assistance from China.

In addition to displacement due to limited, but increased emphasis on maintaining/restoring long-neglected colonial architecture, homelessness is illegal in Cuba, so people often live in what we might view as unsafe dwellings. To a certain extent preservation and rehabilitation of building has more to do with increasing tourism than expanding housing inventory for local people; but my 5 days there were not enough to explore this issue in-depth. My group also visited a national park which is the focus of a successful reforestation project, a planned town that includes a child care center, grade school and Memory Center (which is not for individuals with Alzheimer's as we might assume in the US,) for aging residents of Las Terrazas. The town and countryside are reasonably clean, so whether visitors are domestic or international trash is unwelcomed.

Recent changes in government have allowed individual home ownership, though prices are quite inflated and those capable of buying homes may have assistance from relatives. These generally, become multi-generation family homes. In the last few years the government has also allowed creation of home-based restaurants, called *paladares*, which offer some alternatives to the state food service. These are very regulated however, and subject to closure if state standards are not met. My favorite part of the cuisine –lobster on almost every lunch and dinner menu – a wonderful treat for this seafood-loving Baltimore girl transplanted to southern California

Our group visited state-operated restaurants and a pharmacy, but only saw the outside of a maternity center, where every woman has to give birth and attend prenatal visits. It is rumored that the lack of individuals with disabilities may be linked to screening for defects, but there are many (adult) individuals with missing limbs or using assistive devices such as canes throughout the city.

Overall, the most lasting impression was the general poverty and lack of connection with the rest of the world. While I see telephone ads of children standing in the middle of African savannas holding a cell phone that links them to everything else in the world, I did not have access to Wi-Fi during my trip (although we were told the hotel would have cards we could purchase for personal use) and US cell phones do not work there. Most members of our party had planned to be in contact with family, friends or their respective places of employment using internet services, but this did not occur. As a result, the mission felt more and more like Cold War descriptions of being “behind the iron curtain”.

The educational mission to Cuba was an eye-opener, and reality-check about human conditions world-wide. While citizens attend college and find employment within the state, those holding advanced degrees have fewer career opportunities, and are held in lower regard than those willing to commit to the country’s need for food; which is not a popular idea and has to be incentivized. There appeared few differences among Cuban males and females, other than my experience with the welcome gifts when we visited the historic Tropicana to see where some graduates of the arts academy were employed after completing their studies. Upon entering women were offered carnations and men were offered cigars. When I asked for a cigar, I was told emphatically “No- just for men”. Many years ago I began a 27-year journey as a chain smoker by smoking my first cigars – gift from my grandmother who began smoking at age three on a corncob pipe (and lived to the advanced age of 96). I stopped smoking many years ago, but have retained the option to celebrate special events with a cigar; one per year. I purchased my own cigar with the help of a male mission member at lunch, and greatly enjoyed it following dinner at a *paladar*.

There are limited opportunities to better understand and follow the issues evolving in Cuba; especially, those concerning women’s health, pregnancy and birth, opportunities for learning outside of the university, etc. Unfortunately, political realities still limit access to the daily realities of Cubans, and especially for American citizens. Cuba seems to be part of the slow movement, but it a place that can be on our radar.

Respectfully submitted,

Veda E. Ward